DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 440 317 CG 029 847

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TITLE Violence in Schools: Causation and Prevention.
PUB DATE 2000-04-00
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the National Association of School Psychologists (32nd, New Orleans, LA, March 28-April 1, 2000).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Antisocial Behavior; *At Risk Persons; Biological Influences; Child Abuse; Early Intervention; *Educational Environment; Elementary Secondary Education; Influences; Prevention; *Schools; Sex Differences; *Violence

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the elements leading to school violence in order to propose strategies to help achieve a peaceful school climate. It states that there is evidence that the brain of violent individuals seems to reveal abnormalities. Brain pathology and genetic vulnerability are only two components that may cause individuals to become antisocial and violent. Although males cause most of the violent acts in schools, violent behavior among females is escalating. Risk factors that may lead male and female youth to violent behavior include: coming from a family with a history of criminal violence, being abused, belonging to a gang, and abusing drugs or alcohol. Schools are responding with zero tolerance policies, security measures involving police and security guards, simulations of shooting drills, and conflict resolution/social skills instruction. The preventive measures of early intervention programs and parent training offer hope to help curb the violence. The paper concludes that teachers need the support of counselors and school psychologists to implement violence prevention programs. Reducing class size and personalizing education also would help give students what they need. Working towards a cooperative climate where disagreements can be resolved in a rational way will help establish positive relationships among students and teachers. (Contains 18 references.) (JDM)

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Violence in Schools: Causation and Prevention

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Paper presented at the NASP 2000 Annual Convention and Exposition,

March 28 - April 1, 2000 New Orleans, Louisiana

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Violence in Schools: Causation and Prevention

Most discipline problems in schools are minor disagreements, however, violent behavior in schools has increasingly become lethal, accelerating to shooting sprees and mass killings of students. These incidents have no geographical boundaries, socioeconomic conditions, racial or cultural determinants. They occur in rural as well as in urban schools, and have dominated nationwide as well as worldwide headlines causing shock and alarm. The last three years of the twentieth century have witnessed a barrage of school killings from Pearl, Mississippi - West Paducah, Kentucky - Jonesboro, Arkansas- Edinboro, Pennsylvania - Springfield, Oregon- Notus, Idaho - to Littleton, Colorado. The first three months of the new millennium witnessed a killing of a first grader by a peer in a Mount Morris, Michigan school and in Lisbon, Ohio a student, armed with a gun, held his classmate and teacher hostage until he was disarmed by another teacher. These shocking events inevitably evoke outrage causing parents, educators, law enforcers, policy makers, and citizens to look for reasons and solutions. In spite of public alarm, shootings in schools are relatively low. Since 1992, overall violent acts are down 50% and students are more likely to be recipients of violence at shopping malls and in their homes. The rate of violence on young African American boys and young men in their living community is far greater than it is in schools. Their homicide rate is10 to 11 times greater than for their white male peers, and this number is even greater among impoverished individuals of inner cities. (National Center for Health Statistics, 1996).

The Price of Violence

Youth violence is indicative of a malfunction which, if left unresolved, has the potential to erode the very roots of a society. The human toll of violence has far reaching and detrimental effects. The physical and emotional scars of the bereaved families, friends, and survivors, will remain long after time has faded the memory of the violent occurrence. Individuals witnessing the violence are often traumatized and remain fearful for many years. Violent acts in schools damage learning by stealing precious instruction time, thus promoting a culture of ignorance and illiteracy.

Teachers cannot devote time to teaching when they have to attend to physical and verbal altercations. The education field is losing teachers and failing to attract prospective, dedicated teachers who are not willing to work in disruptive situations. Some school districts are offering "combat pay" supplement to attract teachers willing to teach in "difficult" schools. A great society is an educated society. Illiteracy breeds contempt, despair, and economic failure. We all eventually pay the price.

The financial cost of violence can be staggering. Medical costs may include transportation to hospitals, physician and hospital fees, medication, and rehabilitation. The property damage to schools has been estimated to run into millions of dollars through acts of violence and vandalism. Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado was severely damaged by the killer's pipe bombs and police ammunition. Students could not return to their school to complete the school year. Classes were eventually held in the afternoon in another school. Additionally, bringing transgressors to justice is costly and time consuming. In our democratic society, suspected criminals are innocent until proven guilty, and are entitled to established legal procedures. The process includes expenses related to law enforcement, court fees, and possible incarceration. Goldberg (1994) reports that the average yearly cost of imprisonment for a juvenile is more than $38,000. Society has better use for this money.

The Roots of Violence

Are Americans more violent than other industrialized countries? Americans killed each other eight times as often as did citizens from other industrialized countries. Is violence a result of environmental conditions or are some children more genetically predisposed to violence than others? Are males more violent than females? Is violence more predominant among certain racial or ethnic groups? Can certain personality traits lead to violent behavior? What are the risk factors leading to violent acts? A 1993 UNICEF report compared homicide rates for various countries to the homicide rates in the United States (UNICEF, 1994).

Individual Homicide Rates per 100, 000 people in the United States and in 11 Countries

United States	15.3		
Canada	3.1	Denmark	1.0
Italy	1.9	Netherlands	0.9
Norway	1.4	United Kingdom	0.9
Spain	1.4	France	0.7
Switzerland	1.3	Japan	0.4
Sweden	1.1		
		Average: Except USA	**1.3**

Recent statistics placed Louisiana as the leading murder state for the 1998 year with 25 homicides per 100,000 people. Nevada came second with 22 homicides, Alaska, third with 21 homicides, Mississippi and Alabama tied fourth with 20 homicides. Nationwide the leading cause of death among African American males is murder.

The Role of Genetics and Brain Function

Scans of the brain of violent individuals seem to reveal several abnormalities compared to a normal brain. Dr. Daniel Amen, a neuroscientist, notes that the cingulate gyrus (CG), which curves through the middle of the brain is hyperactive in the brain of murderers. This part of the brain acts like a transmission controlling one thought to another. An impaired CG causes people to get stuck on one thought and if that thought happens to be a violent one, it is very likely that a violent behavior will follow. Lesions in the frontal lobe can cause apathy and distorted judgement and emotion. Researchers found that the prefrontal cortex (the brain's referee) of 50 murderers was dysfunctional. Factors affecting the neurochemistry of the brain can also cause individuals to

behave impulsively and ignore the consequences of their actions. Brain dysfunction can be genetic or the result of head trauma and exposure to alcohol or other toxic substance during the early prenatal period. Debra Niehoff (1999) in her book *The Biology of Violence* explains that in spite of damage, the brain has many blank pages, a "tabula rasa" that can record positive experiences and learning. Brain dysfunction does not necessarily predict violent behavior. Behavior is the result of the interaction between our brain and our experiences. Brain pathology and genetic vulnerability are only small components that may cause individuals to become antisocial and violent.

Female Anti-Social Behavior

There are obviously differences in the social behaviors between males and females. Are women from Venus and men from Mars? Or, are males and females more similar than they are different? Traditionally, many cultures have de-emphasized aggression in female behavior and expect women to be submissive to male domination. Gwedolyn Cartledge (1996) notes that society has imposed a specific role for females; they are socialized to be nurturers and care givers. It is believed that males tend to be more physically aggressive, and that females tend to be more relationship oriented. Social norms allow girls to be more sensitive and open with their feelings. Whereas, boys who openly express emotions are viewed as "sissy" and may be accused of homosexuality. In schools, most aggressive and violent acts are committed by male students. It is interesting to note that the recent school killings are attributed exclusively to male students. This is not surprising. Males commit more murders and are more involved in the gun culture than women. However, violent behavior among females has escalated in the past decade.

The feminist movement and enforcement of equal rights to both genders have helped women, but extreme feminism has also witnessed an escalation of behavior infractions committed by female students. These infractions include petty thefts, assault, truancy, burglary, illicit sexual activity and drug use and sale. Alcoholism among female students has escalated as has the use of marijuana. A report by the Indiana Prevention Resource Center at Indiana University published the following statistics concerning female students and marijuana use:

- Marijuana use among 12 to 17 old females has doubled since 1991.

- Marijuana use by 8th, 10th, 12th, graders rose for the third straight year. Daily use by 8th graders doubled.
- Marijuana/hashish related emergency room episodes among 12 to 17 year olds increased by 50% since last year.
- Seven out of every 25 high school girls have tried marijuana, and four out of 25 are current users.
- Girls at the 8th grade level use drugs at about the same rate as boys.

The sexual revolution has caused female students to become more aggressive in their sexual behaviors resulting in many pregnancies. However, the number of teen age pregnancies is steadily decreasing because of the threat of AIDS, and sex education on abstinence and the use of contraception. Female students are engaging in more physical fighting resulting in escalating female suspensions from schools. Cunningham (1994) notes that female delinquency is on the rise and that violence is common among female gangs. Within a year, females engaged in physical assaults at a rate of 55% compared to the males 65%. Goldstein (1991) reported the rising of female street gangs consisting of girls ages nine to 19. These gangs are violent in nature, often reflecting their members' environment. Female gangs come from every racial and ethnic groups, and are terrorizing many schools and neighborhoods from Toronto to Los Angeles, Milwaukee and beyond.

Racial Groups and Violence

Despite years of reform, many low-income minority students continue to struggle in school and the threat of violence in their community makes them feel that they have to be violent to survive. Young African American males have been called "an endangered species" because of the violent existence in their inner cities environment. Environmental and socioeconomic conditions are the main reasons for the early deaths of young Black males. In addition, African American girls are three to four times more likely to be murdered than any other female group African American Adolescent and pre-adolescent boys are at high risk for homicide. From the middle of 1980 to the end of that decade there was an increase of 140% in firearm related deaths of these young boys (National Center for Health Statistics, 1996). Fifty-two percent of African

American families are headed by one parent, usually a female, and 58% of these homes fall below the poverty level. Minority adolescents residing in impoverished and violent environments frequently become aggressive and violent themselves. More than 91% of a group of elementary age African American children in New Orleans witnessed violent acts, 72% reported having seen weapons used in violent acts, and 50% admitted being victimized (Osofsky, Wewers, Hann & Fick, 1994).

The stereotype Asian student is obedient, studious, and respectful. The crime rate attributed to Asian Americans is relatively low; only 0.9% of all crimes. However, the crime rate is increasing as a result of large numbers of immigrants crowding in unfit conditions. In addition this low percentage may be inaccurate; many Asian gang related crimes are unreported because of the fear of revenge from gang members. For each reported robbery, experts believe there may be as many as three to five unreported robberies. Asian-American students who cannot find acceptance in the mainstream, look for support in gangs of their own kind. Unfortunately, they are led to a life style filled with violence. Violence by Asian gangs is escalating and members frequently engage in turf-related gang wars with other ethnic groups. The use handguns, rifles, and automatic and semi-automatic firearms to settle their disputes and show little remorse for their victims. One of the most frightening aspects of Asian gangs is their brutal robberies.

Many of the problems encountered by Hispanic American students revolve around issues of self-esteem and identity. They perceive their identity in conflict with the larger Anglo culture and in many instances are treated as "inferior." Many problems can be attributed to socio-economic factors. Fifty-two percent of Hispanic homes are single female headed families and fifty-five percent live below poverty level. Numerous Hispanic American students are often described by teachers as quiet, cooperative, loving, and obedient, and many are described as aggressive and violent Homicide rates are estimated to be 3 to 4 times higher than those for their non-minority peers and Hispanic American youth account for 33% of the 120,636 current gang members (Soriano, 1993; Hammond & Yung, 1993).

White students are not spared from committing violent acts. The shooting sprees in schools described at the beginning of this paper were committed by white middle class youngsters, and perplexed white America. People are generally not surprised to hear about assaults in inner

city schools, but this was different. Immediately, psychologists, psychiatrists, educators, and other professionals offered their insights. What caused these young white children to commit such atrocities? Were their homes dysfunctional, or were those boys overly exposed to violent computer games? Were they imitating aggressive behavior on television or the movies or did they suffer from a neurological or psychological problem? Were they influenced by a gun loving society? Numerous explanations were offered, but not one suggested that their behavior was related to their Caucasian race. Violent behavior is multi-cultural and complex. Extraneous circumstances may trigger repressed anger and aggression in individuals who cannot control their aggressive instincts. They, like their minority counterpart are shaped by their circumstances and environment. Gangs are often visualized as being composed of minority group children, however, violent gangs are not exclusive to minority groups.

Risk Factors

Sharon Bagley (1999) wrote an article in Newsweek magazine shortly after the violence in Littleton, Colorado. She examined why the young kill. In her research of the literature she discovered and cited four predominant risk factors that double the chance of a youngster becoming a murderer:

- Coming from a family with a history of criminal violence,
- Being abused (physically or psychologically),
- Belonging to a gang, and
- Abusing drugs or alcohol.

Bagley also cites additional risk factors that would triple the risk of becoming a killer. They are:

- Using a weapon,
- Having been arrested for criminal behavior,
- Having a neurological problem that impairs thinking or feeling, and
- Having behavior problems at school.

Schools are undertaking practical ways to increase resistance to violence. They include:

zero tolerance policies, security measures involving police and security guards, simulations of shooting drills, school uniforms, conflict resolution/social skills instruction and behavior modification strategies. We agree that crisis and security planning are necessary but so are preventive measures. Proactive planning increases the likelihood of teaching interpersonal and intrapersonal skills and reduces the likelihood of conflict. Some schools, such as Crystal City High School in Missouri have successfully implemented a peer mentoring program where juniors and seniors provide a supportive mentoring relationship to freshmen (Stader & Gagnepain, 2000). Mentoring is also effective between teachers and students when it personalizes and creates a bond. Adequate preparation for dealing with disruptive behavior is essential to de-escalate potential violent incidents. Teachers must be knowledgeable not only of behavior modification techniques, but also of strategies from the humanistic and ecological perspectives. Numerous disruptive behaviors can be prevented when teachers become aware of the antecedents prompting the behaviors and by manipulating situations to change the antecedents. Conducting a functional assessment can be helpful in determining the antecedent or what is causing the behavior. In addition, teachers must be tuned in to the warning signs of troubled students. School psychologists and counselors can provide help to prevent students from being suspended. Suspension increases hostility and allows students time to plan their next disruption.

Children are unable to learn pro-social skills when appropriate modeling is lacking, or when they are constantly exposed to inappropriate modeling (in real life or through the media), and when they do not receive pro-social training. Children are not born with a social conscience; they acquire the morality of their social environment. They must be taught the expectations of their society in order to be an accepted part of the large community. When they do not internalize the "traditional" mores, they will seek acceptance by a smaller group such as a gang. The general attitude of educators is that ethics and morality should be taught by the family. We believe that when such teaching is lacking, then children will experience difficulty in moral development. Children need to be civilized. We are not endorsing imposing religious value systems, but we believe that we need to educate the whole child, cognitively and affectively. Children need to be taught acceptance of others and refrain from ridiculing and bullying peers who look or dress differently. They need to value peace and learn how to effectively settle conflicts. There are

many social skills programs such as *Skillstreaming* (Goldstein, 1999), *Connecting with Others; Lessons for Teaching Social and Emotional Competence* (Richardson, 1996) and *Creating the Peaceful School* (Bodine, Crawford, & Schrumpf, 1994) that offer strategies to teach conflict resolution, self-regulation, communication, and empathy and caring.

Conclusion

School violence is everybody's business because it affects the very fiber of our society. Instead of lamenting about the "good old days" which were not really that good for many groups, we need to focus on the factors leading to violent behaviors. Poverty and illiteracy are certainly two risk factors. Early intervention programs and parent training are two ways to combat poverty and illiteracy. Teachers need the support of counselors and school psychologists to implement violence prevention programs. Schools need to reduce class-room size and to personalize education for each child. Schools must take a proactive stand, as well as a reactive stand against violence. Teaching social skills and conflict management can create a cooperative climate where disagreement can be resolved in a rational and civilized manner and where positive relationships among students and teacher can be realized.

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